

**Independence Day Remarks by  
U.S. Ambassador Derek Mitchell  
Jefferson Center, Mandalay  
June 21, 2014**

Mingalaba kh'mya! A warm welcome to you all!

Thank you so much for joining me and my colleagues from the U.S. Embassy this evening to celebrate the 238th birthday of the United States.

I'm honored to be the first U.S. ambassador to host an Independence Day event at our Jefferson Center in Mandalay.

The Center, once the U.S. consulate, remains a symbol of our ties with the people of Upper Myanmar.

More broadly, the event tonight is also a testament to the United States' historic friendship with this country.

I hope you all will take a moment this evening to walk through our photo exhibit inside the Jefferson Center.

You will see everything from Duke Ellington playing at Inya Lake Hotel to Jason Mraz in front of Shwedagon Pagoda; from John F. Kennedy meeting with young people at the White House to President Obama speaking at Yangon University.

Thank you for celebrating our Independence Day a little early. As I'm sure most of you know, our Independence Day is actually on July 4<sup>th</sup>.

It was on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776, that 56 brave Americans from 13 British colonies signed a Declaration of Independence from their British masters. I find it interesting that our two nations celebrate our independence day exactly six months apart – in both cases to mark our break from Great Britain.

But what we also celebrate today at this Independence Day event is not just a moment in American history, but an idea. Or really two ideas, that are closely connected.

Both of them are embodied in the Declaration of Independence: the first idea is democracy, that the people are sovereign.

The other is equality.

On equality, the text of the Declaration says:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—*

All people are equal in their rights to life, liberty (freedom), and the pursuit of happiness. All "men".

The Declaration goes on to say:

*To secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.*

So the Declaration proclaims, Everyone is born with and deserves equal rights to life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, but to make sure those rights are protected in reality, you need democracy, the people to rule.

That's the Declaration of Independence. And that's what we celebrate today.

These notions of democracy and equality were very revolutionary in their day, and perhaps in some ways still are revolutionary in their way today.

Now, the person who wrote those words in the Declaration about democracy, equality, and natural rights I'm sure you all know is Thomas Jefferson, the namesake of this Center.

He also happens to be the founder of the university I attended as an undergraduate, the University of Virginia. Given traditions at that university, we all were told to refer to Thomas Jefferson as "Mr. Jefferson." Typically, however, we all called him "T.J."

He knew in writing those words about equality and natural rights of every person that they were hopes and ideals for the future, and that the United States was not at that time and may not for some time live up to those ideals.

But Thomas Jefferson provided the vision and the moral foundation that Americans have used to promote change for the better in our country over time.

That is why I'm very proud that this Center is the Jefferson Center. At this Center we hope to offer a place to examine these same ideals of equality, justice, and democracy in the Myanmar context.

For the United States, it has guided us as we struggled to liberate African Americans from slavery, establish the right for women to vote, promote tolerance and free expression, and continue efforts to guarantee the rights of all citizens, no matter their race, religion, or sexual orientation.

As you write the next chapter of your country's history, the question arises: upon what values and ideas will you define your identity as a country? How will you define your role as citizens?

The strength of your nation will ultimately depend on the success of an on-going dialogue over these questions among all citizens in coming years.

That's why I'm proud that we are working to significantly expand the programs and services provided at this Center to assist dialogue on all kinds of issues among this country's diverse people. That includes a brand new pilot program we announced today, iPACE, which will be offered right here in Mandalay.

iPACE will offer civil society leaders, political activists, and others interested in civic engagement the tools they need to effectively participate in this country's expanded public discussion.

We are mindful that transitions are never smooth or easy. As noted, my country is very much an example of this. These have not been an easy 238 years!

But we have succeeded as far as we have due to continuing dialogue within our society about a belief that change is not to be feared, and continued commitment to realizing those founding principles of democracy and equal justice for all. It has also been due to friends and partners around the world with whom we have shared experiences of success and failure. I am very proud to be ambassador when the United States is able to re-start that partnership with Myanmar.

Please enjoy your evening. And thank you very much for coming.

*Che Zu Dem Bar-ay.*